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#fieldmemoirs

VLADIVOSTOK, Aug 31, 2013 - Pictured here on my BlackBerry is what I believe is Russia's nuclear briefcase. A movable apocalypse.

I saw it often during my Kremlin press pool trips for Reuters Moscow. After I resigned from Reuters in 2017 to emigrate from Russia, this doomsday accessory first appeared on the newswire in 2023: filmed in China amid fears the Kremlin might cross the nuclear threshold in Ukraine (https://lnkd.in/gTJHG6Hp).

A decade earlier, tensions felt different. Moscow was still seen as a rational stakeholder, supporting UN sanctions on North Korea's nuclear program. In August 2011, in Siberia, I covered one of Kim Jong-il's last public appearances: https://lnkd.in/gGj2YwGU. Russia appeared to be nudging him to return to the six-nation disarmament talks.

Putin’s rhetoric turned nuclear after consolidating power upon returning to the Kremlin in 2012, having survived the first mass anti-Kremlin protests led by Alexei Navalny amid a brief tandemocracy thaw. During Crimea’s annexation, Putin later said he had been ready to put nuclear forces on alert. State propaganda began brandishing mushroom-cloud graphics and warning of “radioactive ash.”

Yet on DPRK, Putin still posed as a dove (my 2016 Beijing report: https://lnkd.in/gvWQPPDQ). Later, he adopted Pyongyang-style nuclear blackmail. Netflix’s “A House of Dynamite” reminded me of the dread of nuclear war as every Soviet schoolkid in the 1980s.

Back to that day: I used my phone camera while waiting in the same Vladivostok dacha where, 40 years earlier, Ford and Brezhnev, with Kissinger at the table, held the 1974 arms control summit. My uncle Boris Kolobov, a cinema chronicler (sketched here by fellow cameraman Vasily Reshchuk), filmed that meeting for Soviet TV. (He later

chronicled Yeltsin shortly before 1991 and filmed Sakharov's funeral in Moscow.)

Standing there decades later, the choreography felt familiar, though the world around it had changed. My 2013 coverage (see me holding a voice recorder and a phone as I sent flash reports https://lnkd.in/geq6v5xp) focused on Putin urging Obama not to strike Syria.

In 2009, Obama pledged in Czechia to cut the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Soon, I covered Medvedev's response from Helsinki: https://lnkd.in/eSVjK8UD. In 2010, Caren Bohan and I filed from Prague Castle as Obama (see his jet in Ruzyně), and Medvedev signed the New START, the most significant nuke treaty in a generation https://lnkd.in/eVPH_9xi. Years later, I photographed the device that could launch them.

Today, February 5, 2026, that treaty expires, leaving the world without legally binding nuclear limits for the first time since 1972.

Visuals: Myself; Council on Foreign Relations; Ford Presidential Library; Primorye archive

An excellent Reuters explainer on Russia's nuke command by Crispian Balmer: https://lnkd.in/gKNTTSwR

#Historical_Journalism
Personal reflections from an ex-Reuters Kremlin correspondent. Views do not represent

the Government of Canada.

NETFLIX
A House of Dynamite (2025)
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Putin filmed in China accompanied by officers with Russian nuclear briefcase

By Reuters

October 18, 2023 4:38 AM EDT · Updated October 18, 2023

Ruptly for Russian Pool
Russian President Vladimir Putin is seen in Beijing
accompanied by officers carrying the nuclear briefcase
00:02 / 00:22

MOSCOW, Oct 18 (Reuters) - Rare footage was shown on Wednesday of Russian President Vladimir Putin in Beijing accompanied by officers carrying the so-called nuclear briefcase which can be used to order a nuclear strike.

POOL REPORT

Arrival at Dacha after train ride
Sat. November 23

This is a pool report on the arrival of President Ford and General Secretary Brezhnev at Mr. Ford's dacha after their train ride from Vozduizhenka.

Mr. Ford's dacha is a cream stucco and frame building set in a compound of similar houses behind a high green wall in a thinly-forested area of evergreen and deciduous trees.

Entrance for the pool, which consisted of one U.S. reporter, three U.S. photographers and a half dozen Soviet cameramen, was through a gate attended by security agents of both sides.

The driveway and pathways had been cleared of snow. It appeared that three to four inches of snow covered the ground. It was higher, of course, along the edges of the cleared passageways.

One one side is a twenty-five foot trellis with grape vines creeping up from roots on each side. Clumps of snow rested on some trees. There were a few hardy brown leaves, but the general impression was one of bareness relieved by the pastels on walls, fences and houses.

The Ford dacha has thin curtains like the kind you see in this hotel. The entrance room on the first floor has a high ceiling with a sparkling chandelier that had clear, green and yellow lobes.

There was the traditional confusion over where newsmen should stand and what they should do in the 45 minutes the pool awaited the Ford-Brezhnev arrival.

Then they came -- and went -- swiftly.

Brezhnev's black limousine, waving Soviet Union and United States flags, turned the corner onto the black paving by the Ford dacha's main entrance.

The President got out the house side, wearing his long blue overcoat and Russian hat.

Russia's President Vladimir Putin (R) talks to journalists in the far eastern city of Vladivostok. (Alexei Nikolskyi/Reuters)

Ответы на вопросы журналистов

31 августа 2013 года 14:00 Владивосток

6:26 AM not sure

G: it is not a snap but could be interesting if you can speak to him. but start is more interesting.

me: ok dont see him here

6:27 AM **G**: okay, no worries.

6:28 AM **me**: it seems some motion has started here in hall

G: yep we watching. will call to see if the feed is delayed.

6:29 AM **me**: almost all seat reserved for officials are occupied by now

ok